

BLACK OAK

INDIANA COLLECTION
BLACK OAK

History

HUMAN GEOGRAPHY OF THE
BLACK OAK AREA OF GARY, INDIANA 46406

By Carol Roark

Being one of the first areas to be built up near Gary, Indiana, Black Oak had a real purpose. It was used as a rest stop, at one time, a guiding point for the travelers going to Chicago.

The people of Black Oak were proud to live there, because they were the ones who built it up. Some of the relatives of the first families are still here, and proud of that fact.

When James Ewen came from England, he was contacted by Capt. William Watts, who had settled in the Hessville, Indiana area. This was an old friend of theirs and they accepted his invitation to move here.

The land was forested, with abundant animal life, fruit and berries. They purchased the land from the federal government in 1864 and in the middle of their land was the Little Calumet River. In 1883 the Nickel Plate Railroad bought a right of way along the south end of their property, with a flag stop to the west of the Ewen home and named it Calumet.

Later James Ewen's wife died and he married, Elizabeth, the daughter of Capt. William Watts. They built a new home at what is now the corner of 29th Av. and Calhoun St. It was known as "Ewen Hunters Home of Calumet, Indiana". They rented boats and provided food and lodging to people who were traveling through the area or those from the area who wanted recreation.

In the early 1900's John Seberger bought property south of 29th Av. to the Nickel Plate Railroad. There he built a saloon known as the "Halfway House" because it was the midway stopping point between Crown Point and Chicago.

About five years later James Ewen died and his widow married a newcomer to the area by the name of Jacob Nickel. They opened a general store across from the saloon. In it was to be a post office by the name of Calumet. When they found that there was already a post office by that name they chose the name of Black Oak because there was such a tree on the northeast corner of 29th av. and Calhoun St. They hoped the town would grow as strong and fast as this type of tree did.

Once the post office opened one bag of mail came in and went out daily. The mail bag was snatched off a long arm by the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern Railroad as it went by. The incoming mail bag was thrown from the train.

In 1940 the first school of the area was built. When it burned down a new one was built at the corner of 29th av. and Burr St. This school also burned down but was rebuilt on the same spot and remains there to this day. Additions have, however, been made to it. For many years it was the only elementary school that served the community. There are two at the present time, the second being Grissom Elementary.

People from diverse ethnic backgrounds moved into the area over the years.

Industries like the steel mills were growing nearby and people needed a place to live. The land was inexpensive, so Black Oak became the mixing bowl of Gary. Today this remains true to a degree, land is still inexpensive and residents can be divided into the following groups, renters, young marrieds purchasing their first home

and senior citizens.

The dream of the young marrieds is to live better than their parents and have their children live better than themselves.

Since many American families do not fit the image of mother, father and children, the one-parent family is another group to be considered. In our area there are many such families. This group is one that is poor and disadvantaged, with poor living conditions due to economical problems which make it difficult to keep a family together.

There is a growing percentage of older people, due to the fact that people tend to live longer today. Many of the senior citizens living in our community have been there since they were young married couples. This group of people live off Social Security only, although the new retirees do have additional pension incomes also. However, this puts a limit on the economical base we are working from.

The U. S. Census figures for the area are as follows:

	1960	1970	1980	Preliminary results 1990
Lake County	513,269	546,253	522,965	470,552
Gary, In.	178,320	175,249	151,953	

The population of Black Oak is one of a mixing bowl rather than a melting pot. What I mean by that is that instead of a major group being predominant, as each new group entered the area they made their presence felt rather than merging with the groups already established.

The first to immigrate to Northwest Indiana were largely native Americans. They were born on the east coast. Most came from the Middle Atlantic and New England states in the early years. Those of

foreign birth were primarily from Germany. They were joined by people from England, Ireland, and the Scandanavian countries. Then came the Czechoslovakians, Hungarians, Polish, Russians, Italians, Blacks and Mexicans.

The Germans were peasants and artisans mainly. They were thrifty, industrious and very respectful of law and order. They came with more funds than the other groups.

Landmarks of the area named for these immigrants are as follows: Hohman Av. for Ernst W. Hohman, Rimbach Av. for Jacob Rimbach and the Hessville area of Hammond, In. for Joseph Hess. All of these men migrated from Chicago.

Some of these same men would have been the ones to patronize "Ewen's Hunters Home of Calumet, Indiana" for their recreational purposes. I'm sure they spread the word of the lush vegetation available, which in turn would have caused eastward expansion from Hammond.

The religions they brought to the area were Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox.

The populace brought with them the cultures and traditions of their native countries to give themselves the feeling of security. When their settlements were formed thsi division was very evident by the inhabitants who occupied them. There were some problems caused by the lack of a common language. Most of the immigrants wanted to retain the native tongues. However, as their children were educated in both church and public school they learned the national language of English, this started to subside. Families spoke their native tongues at home and English everywhere else.

During this growth period the population of the area continued to rise. Land use was agricultural at the beginning, then service industries were added. There were a few small manufacturing firms and some of these remain today, such as Sebergers Concrete Block Co..

This growth continued through the 1950's. As my census figures show the population of Gary has been on the decrease since the 1970's. One reason for this has been the slow down of steel production in the local mills. This in turn precipitated the area economy's downward spiral.

Since then, the steel industry of the area, which includes USX; LTV Steel; Inland Steel Co; Bethlehem Steel Co. and National Steel have undergone drastic changes. They have been on an economy drive to achieve lower costs. They have eliminated and consolidated jobs and initiated programs to upgrade their facilities and production lines. Once again they are becoming more competitive in the world markets due to a higher quality products being produced.

Twenty years ago the route from Valparaiso to Gary was mostly farmland. That portion is now divided by a mammoth interstate and many malls.

The boom areas are conveniently located near Chicago. Between 40-50 percent of the Hoosiers moved from Illinois.

Since 1985, employment in the area has changed also, meaning new jobs and more people to man them.

The proximity to Chicago won't change. The relative amount of space and scenery won't either. And the tax rates are not expected to change .

The additional people will, however, strain the area's physical

structure.

Northwest Indiana commuters already know this because of the Boerman Expressway congestion.

The population shift to the south is not unusual in America. There has always been the perception that suburban life is better and that a lot of space is an option most want.

Hopefully, some of the shift in population from Illinois will settle in the Black Oak area of Gary. If they do then pride of home ownership will return to the community.

At the present time the major areas that need to improve to attract newcomers are as follows:

Borman Expressway and local road improvements.

Fire and police department protection within acceptable time limits.

Drainage and Little Calumet River improvements. This could lead to recreational related industries.

Ecology. Waste material disposal, air and water pollution.

Our town does not fit the Christaller model. The city closest to us that does is Merrillville, Indiana. We do have centers but not arranged in a regular hexagonal pattern to serve the whole area. Instead, we are broken up into independent sections with a lot of unserved spaces.

The CBD or central business district is nonexistent so it can't be used to judge our development in the past 20 years. At one time it was the hub of activity and the city was in a growth stage.

Residents of the community feel that there is little or no land use planning. At least, no long range plan. The community has no say in the development of their neighborhoods.

Hopefully this will change soon or the future of our community looks bleak.

Even though the employment picture is looking upward and some immigration is taking place from Illinois, I really do not feel the overall picture looks too promising for the future. The community right now is composed of at least 1/3 of the population being renters, with no long term interest in the area, another 1/3 are senior citizens who are tired of fighting "City Hall" and getting nowhere. That leaves the final 1/3 who are actively engaged in the struggle of improving services to the community and overseeing its future.

I know that you think I'm being pessimistic and I certainly pray that you are right and that I am wrong.